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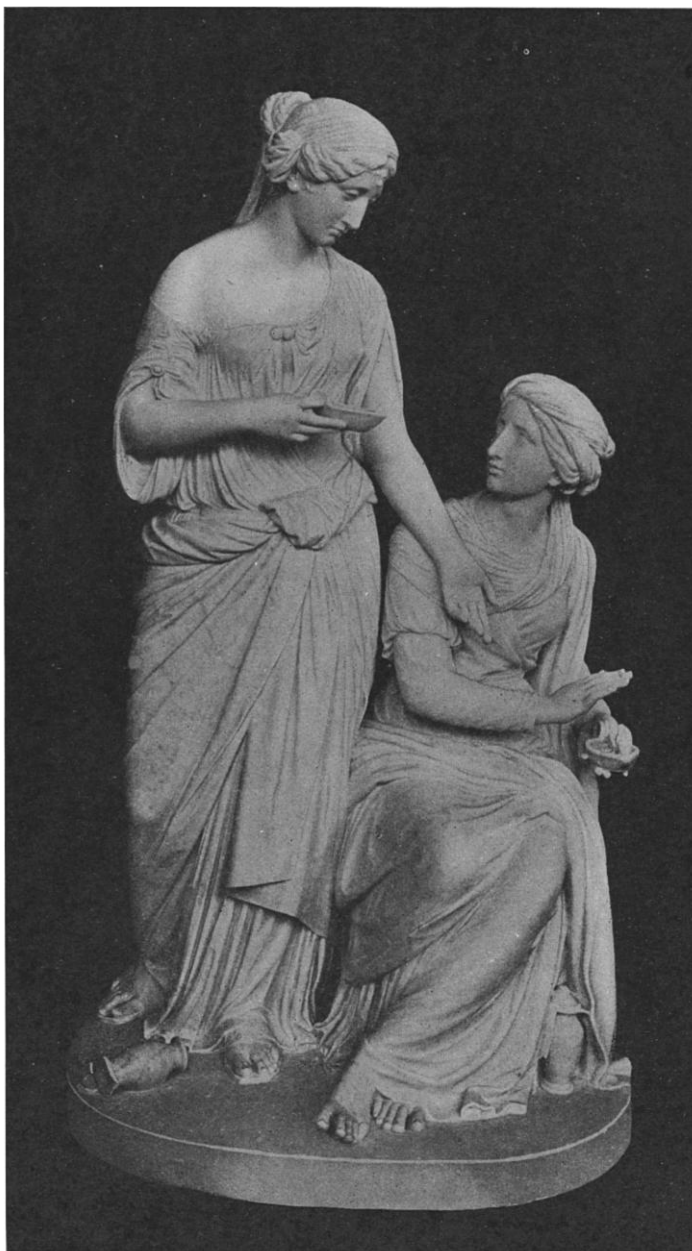
Editorial

CHRISTIANITY AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Can Christianity dispense with the supernatural? Can it surrender the conception of the supernatural and live and prosper? The meaning of the question, not to say the character of the answer, depends much on what is meant by the supernatural. If by it we mean God, if by belief in the supernatural we mean belief in the existence in the universe of a supreme Spirit, wise and benevolent, a God to whom men may look up and on whom they may depend in filial faith, then certainly Christianity cannot live without faith in the supernatural.

If by the supernatural we mean miracles, and by miracles we mean events that contravene law or lie outside the realm of law, then it is not so certain that Christianity cannot live without the supernatural. "Miracle" is a word to juggle with. The New Testament records certain events which it calls by various words translated in our English version by "signs," or "miracles." It enters into no discussion of the question whether these events lay outside the realm of law. The question itself would have been an anachronism. No doubt the New Testament writers regarded these events as extraordinary, and as in some special sense manifestations of divine power. But the question whether these events occurred is totally distinct from the question whether they are in accordance with, or contrary to, law, within or without the sphere of law.

Modern thinkers, with their wholly modern conception of law as a formula for the sequence of events, sometimes define a miracle



THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

A statue by R. Rinaldi made in 1861 for Mr. Alpheus Hardy, of Boston, and recently presented to Wellesley College.

as that which contravenes law or lies outside the realm of law. When to this definition there is added the dictum, all but universally accepted by modern scholarship, that law is universal in its scope, that all things that happen, happen under law, known or unknown, it follows of course that miracles do not happen; that miracle is simply a name for an idea, itself never realized in fact. Such a line of reasoning calls for several comments.

First, the universality of law is not proved. That all things happen under law is a conclusion sustained by some evidence, but is very far from being based on a complete induction of the facts, or even of facts in every realm. It is at best a probability supported by a large proportion of the facts that modern science has investigated. Nevertheless, as a working hypothesis it must doubtless be accepted by thinking men of today. We rarely work with perfect instruments. We must use the tools we have. The next generation may have better ones; but we must work with ours, not with theirs. Admitting that it is quite possibly not the whole truth, and using it with the caution that this fact requires, we must reason today on the assumption that law is universal.

In the second place, it must be remembered that not even the most enthusiastic believer in the universality of law could claim that all laws or all knowable laws are already known. Multitudes of events that yesterday lay outside the sphere of known law, and perhaps seemed therefore extra-legal, are today seen to fall under law. And multitudes of events of which we can today discern no law will doubtless tomorrow disclose the equation of their occurrence to the discerning eye of patient investigators.

But, in the third place, and most important for our present purpose, the dictum of science that law is universal, that therefore the extra-legal is the non-existent, the professedly miraculous occurrence in the sense of the event alleged to have occurred contrary to law is *ipso facto* unhistorical, all this has directly and immediately nothing to do with the question of the historicity of the New Testament miracles. The we-sections of the book of Acts, admittedly eye-witness records of a portion of Paul's life, affirm that Paul healed a man sick of a fever, not by medicine or massage, but by word of command. The synoptic gospels make many similar affirmations

respecting Jesus. Before the dictum of science that extra-legal events do not occur can be brought into relation with such records, it must be shown that such events are extra-legal, lie not only outside the realm of known law, but outside of law. Is our knowledge of the nature of what we call disease, and of the power of what we call mind over what we call matter, or of the relation between things invisible and things visible, so thorough and accurate as to justify us in affirming that such events are outside of law, and therefore the testimony even of eyewitnesses who affirm that they occurred is false? To answer in the affirmative involves an assumption of omniscience, and a charge of mendacity or incompetence, neither of which is warranted. The man who reasons: Miracles are events outside of law; events outside of law do not occur and never have occurred; therefore the New Testament miracles did not occur—falls into a fallacy of ambiguous middle.

But let us not affirm too much. That some ancient records of extraordinary events are probably or certainly inculcable under law does not prove that all such records are true. Not every event affirmed in ancient records is defensible because some of them are. Doubtless there are alleged events which do so clearly contravene known law, and the affirmation of which is so evidently in accord with the ideas of the times from which the records come, that the record is far more probably explained as a product of the thought of the time than is the event itself accounted for as an actual fact. It becomes, indeed, in each case a question of the balance of probabilities. How clear and direct is the testimony? How strong is the evidence that the occurrence of such an event would contravene law? One may rightly hesitate to believe a story of the levitation of an *ax*, or that the record of the appearance of deceased saints in Jerusalem is to be taken precisely at its face value. An honest and fair-minded student of the Bible may very well find himself compelled to classify the events commonly included under the category of the miracle into three classes: first, those for which the evidence is so good, and the grounds for affirming that they contravene law so insufficient, that they may reasonably be set down as historical; second, those of which the evidence is so slender, and the contrariety to law so clear, that they cannot be regarded as historical; third, those that

must be held *sub judice* for further light respecting the records or the laws under which they may possibly fall.

Can Christianity dispense with the supernatural? With the supernatural in the sense of events that contradict law or lie outside all law it can dispense, and for this generation at least, and with men whose thinking has been shaped by scientific thought, it must dispense. To affirm today that God does things outside of law is to burden our apologetic with a load which it cannot afford to carry. It involves, moreover, the idea of God as a being of caprice rather than of principle, or as unable effectively to communicate with men except by breaking through his own principles of action—an idea which thoughtful men, when once they understand it, cannot and will not accept.

But the supernatural written Supernatural and meaning God, a supreme benevolent Spirit at the heart of things—this assuredly Christianity cannot and will not surrender. Nor is there any good reason to believe that it will, or ought to, eliminate from the records of early Christianity all those events which seemed to men of that day as altogether extraordinary, and which to us today are still perhaps on the border line between known law and the region of which we do not as yet know the law. We need not affirm that things happen contrary to law. We will not deny that many things have happened of which neither the eyewitnesses nor we ourselves fully know the law.